



Call for action to address online child sexual abuse and exploitation in Belgium: Findings from French speaking child sexual abuse material users

A statement from Suojellaan Lapsia, Protect Children ry. concerning online child sexual abuse and exploitation in Belgium, with findings from French responses to the ReDirection surveys of individuals who search for and view child sexual abuse material on the dark web.

[Suojellaan Lapsia, Protect Children ry.](#) October 2023

Executive Summary

The epidemic spread of child sexual abuse material (CSAM) online calls for urgent action to be taken to detect and remove CSAM from the internet, develop perpetration prevention measures, and support survivors and victims. A recent increase in reports involving CSAM in Belgium, substantiated by findings from Protect Children's ReDirection research on French speaking CSAM users, underlines the importance of immediate action in Belgium.

This statement presents key findings from [Protect Children's ReDirection](#) research on individuals who search for and view CSAM on dark web search engines. The statement presents an analysis of 399 French language responses to the "Help us to Help You" and "No need for help" surveys, collected between 5 May 2021 and 5 October 2023.

[Read the full results of Protect Children's ReDirection research here.](#)

Long-term negative impact of child sexual abuse material

The spread of images and videos depicting the sexual abuse of children has lifelong negative impacts on victims and survivors. A survey conducted by Protect Children on the impact of sexual violence revealed that 95% of survivors experience long-term negative impact as a consequence of the sexual abuse they were subjected to in childhood.¹ In response to a 2017 Canadian Centre of Child Protection survey, many respondents shared that the knowledge that their abuse had been recorded and shared impacted them differently from the hands-on abuse, because while the hands-on abuse may have ended, the images or videos were a permanent reminder of the abuse.² The long term negative impact on survivors highlights the extreme importance of detecting and removing CSAM from the internet, to end the continuous revictimisation of survivors.

Prevalence of child sexual abuse material

CSAM is procured, stored, and shared everywhere on the internet, not only on the dark web. Perpetrators often contact children on social media, instant messaging, or gaming platforms and manipulate or extort them to procure or create CSAM.³ Preliminary findings from Protect Children's latest research uncover the widespread use of social media, instant messenger, and pornography platforms for viewing and sharing CSAM, as well as directly contacting children.⁴

In 2022, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) received over 32 million reports of suspected child sexual abuse by the public and online electronic service providers.⁵ These 32 million reports consisted of over 88 million images, videos, and other files depicting sexual violence against children. Over 5 million images and videos were contained in reports concerning the European Union.⁶ The majority of reports to NCMEC were detected in messaging services and social media platforms.⁷ As all reports concern the surface web, it is evident that CSAM is widely distributed on the surface web.

¹ Suojellaan Lapsia, Protect Children ry., 'Online crimes of sexual violence against children in Finland - Experiences of Finnish survivors and results from perpetrator research' (2023) <<https://www.suojellaanlapsia.fi/en/post/online-crimes-of-sexual-violence-against-children-in-finland>> 7.

² Canadian Centre for Child Protection, 'Survivor's Survey: Full Report 2017' (2017) <https://protectchildren.ca/pdfs/C3P_SurvivorsSurveyFullReport2017.pdf> 148.

³ Over 70% of actioned reports to the Internet Watch Foundation in 2021 included CSAM that had been "self-generated" by the child victim. "Self-generated" refers to material that has been recorded by the child themselves due to e.g., manipulation, grooming, coercion, or extortion. See more: Internet Watch Foundation, 'The Annual Report 2021' (2021) <<https://annualreport2021.iwf.org.uk/>>.

⁴ Suojellaan Lapsia, Protect Children ry., 'Alarming Prevalence of Child Sexual Abuse Material on Social Media and Instant Messengers' (2023) <<https://www.suojellaanlapsia.fi/en/post/preliminary-research-csam-on-surface-web>>.

⁵ NCMEC, 'CyberTipline 2022 Report' (2022) <<https://www.missingkids.org/gethelpnow/cybertipline/cybertiplinedata>>.

⁶ European Commission, 'EU Strategy for a more effective fight against child sexual abuse' <https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/internal-security/child-sexual-abuse/eu-strategy-more-effective-fight-against-child-sexual-abuse_en#:~:text=As%20reported%20to%20the%20US,5%20million%20images%20and%20videos>; The Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) reports that France is the fifth largest host country for CSAM within the European Union, see more: IWF, 'France fifth for hosting child sexual abuse content in EU, as criminals target French servers' (2023) <<https://www.iwf.org.uk/news-media/news/france-fifth-worst-for-hosting-child-sexual-abuse-content-in-eu-as-criminals-target-french-servers/>>.

⁷ NCMEC, 'CyberTipline 2022 Report' <<https://www.missingkids.org/gethelpnow/cybertipline/cybertiplinedata>>.

32 million

individual reports of suspected child sexual abuse to NCMEC in 2022

88 million

images, videos, and other files depicting sexual violence against children

5 million

files from reports of child sexual abuse online concerning the EU

Dramatic increase in reports of online child sexual abuse and exploitation in Belgium

Reports concerning CSAM in Belgium have increased drastically by 188% between the years 2017 and 2021.⁸ This increase is also evident from the extensive reporting of Belgian cases in the media.⁹ In 2020, the Belgian East Flanders Federal Judicial Police found, through an investigation conducted with the support of Europol, 9 million images and videos of CSAM depicting children from all over the world.¹⁰ The Belgian investigation resulted in the identification of 60 suspects, from which 24 were located in Belgium, and 40 child victims.¹¹ So called “sextortion”, or sexual extortion, is a particularly worrying trend in Belgium as reported by Child Focus who received a 137% increase in reports in 2022, when compared to 2018, demonstrating a substantive increase during the Covid-19 pandemic.¹²

Findings from French speaking CSAM users

Protect Children’s ReDirection project aims to understand more about CSAM offenders, in order to effectively prevent and tackle crimes of sexual violence against children. For the past three years, Protect Children has been gathering data from anonymous surveys of individuals searching for CSAM on dark web search engines, producing insights into the thoughts, feelings, and behaviours of CSAM users. The responses to the ReDirection surveys in French reveal important findings for

⁸ Protect Children, Child Focus, Agir Contre la Prostitution des Enfants, Netzwerk gegen Menschenhandel and Child10, ‘Online Grooming: A growing threat to children in the digital age’ (2023) <<https://www.suojellaanlapsia.fi/en/post/grooming-report>>.

⁹ See for example: The Brussels Times, ‘Lax verdict’ in Belgium’s ‘biggest child pornography case ever,’ says Child Focus’ (2020) <<https://www.brusselstimes.com/103819/lax-verdict-in-belgiums-biggest-child-pornography-case-ever-says-child-focus>>; The Straits Times, ‘Four men sentenced in Belgium in vast child pornography case’ (2020) <<https://www.straitstimes.com/world/europe/four-men-sentenced-in-belgium-in-vast-child-pornography-case>>; Brussels Signal, ‘Belgian media rocked by child pornography investigation’ (2023) <<https://brusselssignal.eu/2023/08/belgian-media-rocked-by-child-pornography-investigation/>>; The Brussels Times, ‘Child abuse reports on the increase in Belgium’ (2019) <<https://www.brusselstimes.com/news/belgium-all-news/83129/reports-of-child-abuse-on-the-increase-uc-leuven-limburg>>; Europol, ‘90 suspect identified in major online child sexual abuse operation’ (2020) <<https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/90-suspects-identified-in-major-online-child-sexual-abuse-operation>>.

¹⁰ Europol (n 10).

¹¹ Europol (n 10).

¹² Child Focus, ‘Jaarverslag 2022’ (2022)

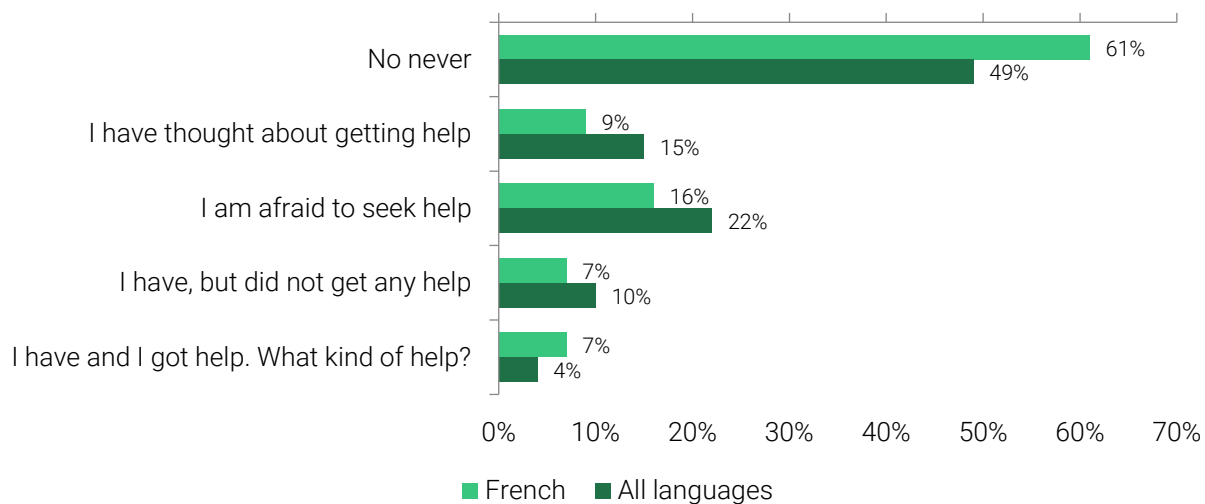
<https://childfocus.be/Portals/0/RA_2022_NL_WEB_DEF.pdf?ver=_uWOLz20DtuOzfWNRawCOA%3d%3d> 17.

crime prevention in French speaking countries and regions, including Belgium, where French is spoken natively by 36% of the population, and as a second language by half of the population.¹³

Finding 1: Low rates of help-seeking behaviour highlight the need for French prevention resources

When compared to the global average, French speaking respondents were more likely to want to stop searching for and viewing CSAM but were less likely to have sought help. 57% of French speaking respondents say that they want to stop searching for CSAM, compared to 48% of the average responses. However, despite the motivation to change, nearly two-thirds of French speaking respondents report that they have never sought help to stop using CSAM, 12% more than the global average.

Figure 1: Have you sought help to stop searching, using, or sharing CSAM/illegal violent material?



This finding highlights the need for the development of effective, low threshold help resources for people who fear that they might commit a crime against a child. The effective prevention of sexual violence against children must be holistic, focusing not only on prevention of victimisation, but also on the prevention of offending. There is a lack of French language offender-focused resources, therefore, Protect Children is translating and implementing the ReDirection Self-Help Program for French speaking CSAM users.

ReDirection Self-Help Program in French coming soon. [Subscribe to Protect Children’s newsletter for updates.](#)

¹³ World Population Review, ‘What Languages do People Speak in Belgium?’ (2023) <<https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/belgium/language>>.

Finding 2: The ease of access to CSAM online calls for effective detection and removal

Findings from the ReDirection surveys reveal the shocking ease of access to CSAM online. Over half of the French speaking respondents report that they were first exposed to CSAM by accident. Additionally, 13% say they first saw CSAM when searching for pornography. Images and videos depicting the sexual abuse of children should not be viewed by anyone, let alone be so widely available that they can be found accidentally. The immense volume of CSAM circulating online can only be reduced when tech companies are obliged to detect and remove such material.

51% of French speaking respondents report first seeing the material accidentally, clearly demonstrating the ease of gaining access to CSAM on the internet.

Finding 3: Not “just” viewers: Viewing CSAM leads to contact offending against children

Recent research demonstrates a clear correlation between viewing CSAM and seeking direct contact with children online.¹⁴ This refutes the previous belief that CSAM viewers and contact offenders are two distinct groups. Within the French speaking respondents to the ReDirection surveys, 41% report that viewing CSAM has made them think about seeking direct contact with a child. Additionally, nearly a third say that they have sought contact with a child after viewing CSAM.

41% of French speaking respondents report that viewing CSAM has made them think about seeking direct contact with a child.

27% of French speaking respondents have sought direct contact with a child after viewing CSAM.

Key Takeaway

Research has not only proven the overlap between these types of offending but has also begun to acknowledge the impact that viewing CSAM has on contacting children.¹⁵ As the existence and availability of CSAM appears to lead to further crimes of sexual violence against children, the urgency and importance of detecting and removing CSAM from the internet is palpable.

¹⁴ Insoll, Ovaska, Nurmi, Aaltonen & Vaaranen-Valkonen, 'Risk Factors for Child Sexual Abuse Material Users Contacting Children Online: Results of an Anonymous Multilingual Survey on the Dark Web' (2022) *Journal of Online Trust and Safety* <<https://tsjournal.org/index.php/jots/article/view/29>>.

¹⁵ Insoll, Ovaska, Nurmi, Aaltonen & Vaaranen-Valkonen, 'Risk Factors for Child Sexual Abuse Material Users Contacting Children Online: Results of an Anonymous Multilingual Survey on the Dark Web' (2022) *Journal of Online Trust and Safety* <<https://tsjournal.org/index.php/jots/article/view/29>>.